

DEQ Pioneers Laboratory Accreditation Program to Ensure Accuracy in Data Reporting

DEQ relies on the quality of data that laboratories report to the Agency. Consequently, the Department pioneered an innovative and ground-breaking lab accreditation program to ensure that decisions are made from accurate information. The program is vital to services the Agency provides to its customers and the public. DEQ's Laboratory Accreditation Program is designed strictly for analytical data from commercial laboratories.

The need for a lab accreditation program was recognized in the late 1980s because some labs were producing inaccurate data. A few were makeshift laboratories, which sometimes turned out to be located in people's garages. Louis Johnson, Administrator of the Laboratory Services Division and Accrediting Authority, said, "Some commercial laboratories were doing analytical work using thermometers from the local drug stores that were not calibrated against any standard. They were also using containers (that) were not washed, they were not sampling properly, (and they) were not refrigerating the samples."

The real push came from the Legislature in 1986 to create a laboratory certification program. A committee comprised of people in government, industry, and commercial laboratories met over a period of years to develop regulations for commercial laboratories in the state of Louisiana. The regulations were promulgated on May 20, 1998 and DEQ was ready to begin the process.

The first application for accreditation came on November 20, 1999. Since then, DEQ has received 268 applications from in-state and out-of-

state commercial laboratories. Currently, there are 32 laboratories in the state of Louisiana that have been certified and the rest of the applications will be processed by the end of this year.

DEQ is also seeking to become a nationally recognized lab accrediting authority. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) organized a group called the National Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Conference (NELAC) that is comprised of all the states, the federal government, and laboratories across the country. This group convenes to discuss regulations, develop standards, and develop guidelines for doing laboratory work nationwide. The NELAC provides guidance to the National Laboratory Accreditation Program (NELAP), through which DEQ is currently applying for certification. By attaining this national standard, laboratories that meet the proper certification can do work for other states just as DEQ can receive data from laboratories nationwide that have been approved with a NELAP certification. States and laboratories that join this program will save money by doing away with unnecessary auditing.



Lab Accreditation Staff: Louis Johnson, Karen Varnado, Paul Bergeron, Jim Davies, Lou Moniotte, David Boucher

DEQ's program is unique because the Department accredits all laboratories that provide the agency with data. Most accrediting programs do not cover radiation or emissions testing. DEQ is certifying these facilities to make sure that all data coming in are held to a high standard.

DEQ is also pioneering the accreditation of emissions testing laboratories. No other state has attempted to do this. The program is taking a little longer than the rest, but it is because the Department designed it from scratch. DEQ employees have had to develop new inspection checklists and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for auditing purposes.

A laboratory seeking accreditation must first send an application to DEQ. After a review of the application materials is finished, an on-site audit of the laboratory must be performed.

During the audit, DEQ officials meet with the technical director, lab manager, and key staff to discuss their Quality Assurance Plan, SOPs, checklists, or any other matter of concern with their application. Auditors tell the laboratory workers what they will be looking for, which is basically the correct methods of how a laboratory should be run. After this meeting, auditors leave the technical director and go with a laboratory representative into the different areas of the facility to talk to analysts and take notes on how they are performing their jobs.

After looking at all the methods and materials on the day of the audit, an exit briefing with the staff is held. This is the time when DEQ auditors tell the laboratory what they have found. "They know when we leave, exactly what we saw and what we found," DEQ's Johnson said.

Once back in the office, DEQ auditors issue a formal report and the laboratory has 30 days to send the Agency a corrective action plan. If approved, the laboratory can fix the problems and start sending in the corrective action documentation.

Finally, a certification can be issued once DEQ feels that a laboratory is in compliance with all of the regulations.

When asked how it benefits the state, Louis said, "It allows people to have better faith in the data that's coming out because everybody is being treated equally. The whole program is designed to make sure laboratories are producing acceptable data for use by DEQ and the public."

DEQ Teams with DHH to Help Ensure Clean Water for Small Communities

DEQ, in conjunction with Department of Health and Hospitals (DHH), awards loans to water systems that have a hard time finding money for drinking water facilities. The first loan was awarded to Church Point (Acadia Parish) late last year and two more have been awarded to other communities since that time.

Church Point Mayor Roger Boudreaux said, "This low interest loan allows a small community such as Church Point to be able to enlarge our water facility so that we may provide good, clean quality water to our constituents without having to substantially raise our water rates."

Congress passed the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF) loan program in 1996 as part of the Amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act. The revolving fund means that a town can borrow money, but it must pay it back to make funds available for another community. It is a joint federal and state program. The Environ-



L to R: Vince Sagnibene, Administrator in DEQ's Office of Environmental Assessment which oversees the municipal facilities grants program, congratulates Roger Boudreaux, Mayor of Church Point. The Acadia Parish community is the first recipient of a low interest loan which will be used to upgrade their water system.

mental Protection Agency (EPA) gives DHH the capitalization grants and the state must provide 20% of what was given to match. A minimum of 15% of the funds must be loaned to water systems that serve a population of 10,000 or less. DHH conducts technical reviews to determine which communities will receive assistance while DEQ administers the funds.

Drinking water loans can be used to build water treatment plants, repair and build distribution lines, build water towers, buy land, and anything else a recipient would need for a drinking water

treatment system.

The program is a way to constantly keep updating Louisiana water systems. DEQ's Catherine Lundergan, an Environmental Quality Coordinator, said, "It's not something that a community can build and say, 'We're done forever' because the systems wear out and the

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